
ISSCR public symposium: Hope, passion and restraint for stem cell clinical trials

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The annual meeting of the International Society for Stem Cell Research is Mecca for the hardcore stem cell research community. The next four days will be filled with intense and detailed discussions of all of the molecular details of how stem cells work--details we need to understand to move stem cells into the clinic effectively and safely.

But last night, as always, the meeting officially started with a symposium designed specifically for the public. For the third year I have had the pleasure of being on the planning committee for this event and this year we decided the field was ready to discuss clinical trials. We chose the title "The Stem Cell Promise: Moving to the Clinic" and decided to alternate brief talks by patient advocates and scientists/clinicians.

What a rapt full house of attendees heard was an impassioned evening of hope and excitement balanced nicely with restraint and patient persistence. Early on California's spinal cord injury advocate Roman Reed reminded the audience that the Geron trial, the first using cells derived from embryonic stem cells, is really about safety, not someone getting up out of a wheel chair. But at the same time he urged everyone in the audience to become an active advocate; to write to their legislatures to make sure this work gets funded: "Take a stand for research; take a stand for stem cells, so that one day we all can stand."

Michael Fehling, a neurosurgeon at Toronto West Hospital, acknowledged that if scientists are going to design the perfect trial there's more they need to know about how neuronal progenitor cells will behave at the site of an injury. But he said, "You don't have to have all the answers," adding that most scientists believe our knowledge level is ready to begin clinical work. He admonished those in the field to make sure they learn from clinical trials and any information they can glean from how the cells perform in patients to direct a new wave of basic research to learn more of the answers needed to design a better trail. "We need reverse translational research."

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